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BACK BRAIN RECLUSE

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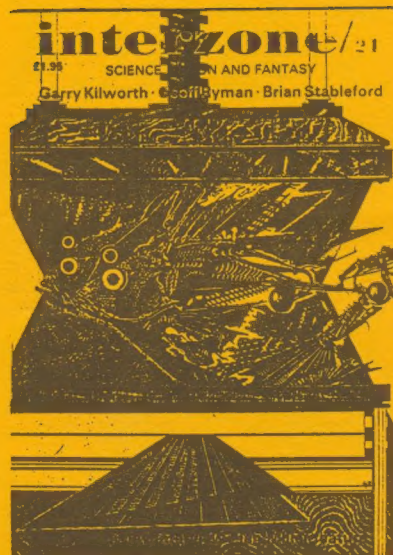
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CONTENTS

4 THE TECHNOPHOBE
Lyle Hopwood

10 SO WHY DO I NEED
YOU?
H.R. Felgenhauer

12 THE IDOL IN THE
OFFICE Tom Farbman

14 CHECKMATE
Benson Herbert

21 RABBIT AND
HOUNDS
Christine Michael

22 CATHODE WALTZ
Tim Nickels

26 A PATRIOT'S PRIDE
H.R. Felgenhauer

28 PASSENGER Ray Jon

29 DREAM THE REAL
Simon Clark

"THE BIRTHDAY PARTY
(WITH DUMB WAITERS)"
- COVER BY SMS

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AND KAISER BILL.



THE TECHNOPHOBES

LYLE HOPWOOD

In the bar full of Marilyn Monrobots the brunette stood out like the Queen of Sheba in a dole queue. She was sitting on a barstool, legs crossed, looking chaste. Too chaste. She was conforming to a moral code she disagreed with, and it showed. She was wearing a sheath dress that covered her closely from her armpits to her knees, and a pair of unlikely high-heels. Not shoes; just high-heels with glued strips of metal under the soles of her feet to keep them in that unnatural arch. She was drinking a Tyrian Purple, and the violet glow lit her face in the gloom of the bar. Under her stool, a Hermes vanity case lounged, kicking its legs together in boredom.

We had enough details on file; this was Nuada. No doubt at all. All I had to do was get the evidence, find her guilty and shoot her.

I had to walk across the dance-floor to get to the bar, hating every sound, every flashing light, until I could duck through the soundproof exclusion field over the doorway and sit next to her.

"What's in that drink?" It was an obvious opening remark. "Perrier, Pernod, blackcurrant and a glowball." She fished the glowball out with a little Japanese flag cocktail stirrer. "I don't think you're supposed to swallow this though." She dropped it back in.

"Lemme get you another one."

She paused a long time, considering this. The lab boys had worked hard on this case; I was supposedly her type. They hadn't told me that she would be mine. She was beautiful. She had the sort of body that costs a lot of

money. None of this nature red in tooth and claw stuff; it had been radically altered. You could see fiberoptic channels running smoothly over the tendons when she moved her neck, meaning she had a Neuramet abdominal computer fitted.

But it was her eyes that got me. She had a really slow blink, part seductive, part lizard. I just looked at her, kind of waiting for the rare, slow blink. She saw me looking at the merchandise. "It's a fully subcutaneous datareducer. West German, good stuff. I hire it out, do a lot of minimal-guidance numbercrunching. It makes a profit."

"I was looking at the body, not the computer." She smiled sort of sadly. "I spent a year in a vat."

"What, Morphogenetic Re-establishment?"

She nodded. I wondered where she got the money. I knew her operation didn't make a profit. She must have her fingers in some other game. For MGR, they block off your forebrain, force your body back to the condition of an embryo - tricky this, some people just don't have enough stem cells and die - then wire you all over with a datanet, and feed the morphogenetic field of some agreed-on body beautiful over the net. All your cells think they're in the wrong place and set off looking for their 'proper' neighbor. After about a year the cells remature, and they attempt to kickstart your forebrain. Sometimes they find they've got a very pretty braindead organdonor. Sometimes you wake up.

She finished her drink, tipped out the

glowball and called the Hermes. It stood up and opened. She put the thing in, and the case jumped back under her seat. I called over the barman. "Hiya, Governor, what do you want to drink?"

It hadn't occurred to me that the barman would recognise me. I glanced at Nuada. She looked cool; after all, it was also a street title. I ordered the drinks. I stopped myself from giving her name as Nuada just in time. It was her Publisher's Callsign, and it wasn't supposed to be generally known. Nuada Argetlam was a Celtic god, the guy with the first cybernetic prosthesis; he'd got his arm cut off in a battle, and had it replaced with one made of silver. She'd taken the name because she had a crushed hand. No-one gets out of a vat sane a second time, so she'd got a mechanical and covered it with a silver glove.

"What's your name, lady? Since we seem to have got to that stage of the relationship."

"Phoenixia."

"What's that, a female Phoenix?"

"No, it's a country. My father's Lebanese. He called us all that sort of name. My brothers are called Tyre and Sidon."

"Great. You can call me Ad."

She raised an eyebrow. "Not Guv'ner Ad?"

"Hah, hah." My laughter sounded hollow even to me. "Just the barman's joke."

She pursed her lips, then reached out for her drink with a childish gesture, almost a grab. My heart melted. With any luck I'd get to make love to her before I shot her. Unlike some of the guys, I never found it as good afterwards. The euphoria didn't last. The sound system next door was still audible; the music came through the walls. I could hear a deconstruction of a filthy song from the Banned Years. Despite, or because of, the sampling and repetition of short musical and lyrical phrases, the obscenity still came through. Remember the law they call the 'nudge, nudge, wink, wink Act'? Any phrase can be obscene in English, and be prosecuted on intention, not commission. The test case was that song with the lyric 'Give a dog a bone'. The jury found it intentionally obscene in context. They had to take thousands of texts and recordings off the market. 'Bleeping' wasn't good enough any longer. Since every cut or bleep is obvious to the consumer, it merely draws attention to the underlying obscenity. And this song was the worst I'd heard in a public place for years. No wonder Nuada the Pornographer hung out here. The song's title - 'Get into the Groove' - was enough to charge, try and shoot the MC doing the deconstruction. I must have

looked uncomfortable, because she asked me what was wrong. I muttered something about obscenity making me nervous. I'm not a good liar. She laughed.

"It's about dancing. I know what you're thinking, but remember old records had grooves. There was a subculture built on how groovy something was, and so on. I did History of Art at college."

I knew that: so did I. And I knew that using a well worn word or phrase in an obscene context was still obscenity. I got up and pulled her human hand.

"Let's get out of here before it's raided."

She pulled back, finished her drink and tipped out the glowball. She called the Hermes, and it walked to heel and opened. She dropped the spark of light into it - I could see several in there already - and came with me.

We came up on Day Street, amongst the blazing lights of Freeport's centre. Dazzled by the change from the lurid bar to the actinic neon I stood still, but she forged ahead, trying to pull me into a coffee bar.

"Can't we go to your place?" It came out a whine, not a seductive growl. But she nodded. She stepped towards the main road and stopped a taxi by sheer charisma. We waited for the Hermes to jump in and then followed.

In the dark of the cab, she kissed me.

I thoroughly enjoyed it, even though I now knew why her eyes were so odd. In the dark, they sparkled dryly. They were artificial.

We got to her place, a couple of tiny rooms on the third floor in West Grove. They weren't what I expected; they were simultaneously more and less modern. There was a solido screen on the wall, a huge piece of Tsatung computerware, a vidfone, and modern minimalist cooking facilities, but these seemed to have been bolted onto a twentieth-century guest house infrastructure. There was no sign of wealth. I needed to get a close look at the computer. The Tsatung had a big Duty Paid stamp on the side; it had been imported into Natokoku and then reexported to Freeport. This was the legal route, but no-one else had ever done it. It meant she was scared. But it wasn't evidence.

She was feeding and brushing the Hermes. I went into the kitchen-alcove to fix us another drink. On the shelf literally hundreds of glowballs were lined up. Some were exhausted, some were dim, and quite a few were fully bright. You'd have to drink a lot of cocktails to get so many. I fixed a gin, and dropped in a glowball. She was laying on the couch, looking at the ceiling where the videoprojector was showing some evangelist

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silently exhorting us to have faith. She didn't seem to feel like talking, so I led her to the bed. We made love by the light from the glowballs and the citylights flashing through the weird net curtains. She could see perfectly in the dark, of course. And her body fully lived up to my expectations. Afterwards, I felt a vague regret that we didn't have jails or mindcontrol anymore. Surely it would be better to curtail her freedom of choice a little than to kill her? Whatever the Behaviorists said, maybe if I just explained the crime of pornography, she'd give it up? In the morning, weak winter sun lacing among the nets, I asked about her eyes.

"I was born blind. It's the innervation, not the eyeball, so I couldn't get a transplant. My father is very rich, he just bought artificial ones without batting an eyelid, so to speak. But I wasn't happy with my body anyway, so I chose to go in a vat. The bodyshop crooks didn't tell me that the central nervous system can't be reverted to fetal pliability, and isn't altered in the vat. I woke up beautiful, but blind. These are Zeiss, they're the best in Natokoku."

"How can you see without innervation?"

"I can't see images projected on the visual cortex like you, I've just learned that certain sensations mean certain colors and shapes."

It was time to bring the conversation round to publishing. "Can you read with the Zeiss?"

"I can't read print very well. But I've learned to read text as ASCII in a computing matrix. That's why I'm in such demand as a computer. I'm one level nearer assembler in dataprocessing."

"I'd heard of blind people doing that. So you don't read many books then." Fighting a certain panic, I got back onto the case in hand. "Do you read stuff off computer bulletin boards? Have you ever been a sysop? Ever moved text from processor to processor apart from across the legal monitored networks? Have you ever published uncensored material across a public hotline?"

Alarmingly unaware of the reason for the questions, she pouted: "Obscenity never leaves your mind, does it, Ad?"

"I'm a Governor of Law, Nuada. I'm here to gather evidence of illegal publishing activity. When I find it, you're dead meat."

She backed away. I needed to immobilise her fast, so I reached around and grabbed a piece of wormware in a drive. I hit her across the side of the head, and she crumpled up. I could hear the Zeiss' stepper motor whine as it fought to stay in the distorted

skull. The Hermes jumped up but it couldn't help her, and it just sat down beside its mistress, sniffing her hair. I turned to the Tsatung. It didn't have a keyboard or vdu and I couldn't work out how to interface with it. I'm not a computer user; they always seem immoral to me, I suppose it's my line of work. Then I saw the Greek Tragedy-type mask on the console with the thick fiberoptic cable leading into the RS232F port. I remembered why it's called 'interface' - because the human face has such precise muscular and nervous control, much better than the hands. I pushed my face into the mask and the Phoenix Environment came up. I gazed sightlessly into it. It takes years to ride this objectoriented space; I was just struggling.

The operating system was asking me if I wanted to browse opaque forms or collect kernel objects or somesuch. I'd learned enough object oriented programming at school to blunder my way over to the system browser and flick through to the word processor. It's all done with eye movement, blinks and sneers. Although I had the control, I didn't have the knowledge and on the way to the word processor I left the system in tatters. I flicked over the main files but found nothing. Shopping lists, letters to her dad, a complaint to some company about faulty software. I looked into the matrix but only found a powerful maths co-processor. She really was a part-time numbercruncher! By the time I found that out I'd destroyed one of Phoenix's basic classes of object and the machine crashed. I lost consciousness.

When I woke up, my head hurt so much I was mad enough to walk to the Pan-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere and disassemble Tsatung with my bare hands. The machine had rebooted to its previous saved image. I ripped the mask off. My head still felt like it was going to explode and there was a lump the size of a glowball behind my ear. It took me a while to realize that the machine hadn't taken me down with it, I'd been struck with something at the same time I'd crashed it. Nuada was gone and the room had been turned over. The soft furnishings were smouldering, set alight with spirit. There were signs of a struggle, broken lamps, turned over chairs, even blood. And worst of all, Nuada's silver hand, ripped out from the stump. I guess I reacted very badly. I'm not a great lover of cyberprosthetics, though I got some sort of thrill from being near those unhuman eyes. The hand made me feel sick, and I edged towards it with a Faksheet to scrape it off the floor into the trash disposal. As I touched it, it reflexively grabbed at the

paper. I felt the bile rise, and I ran out of the room and fled downstairs. The room blazed up behind me.

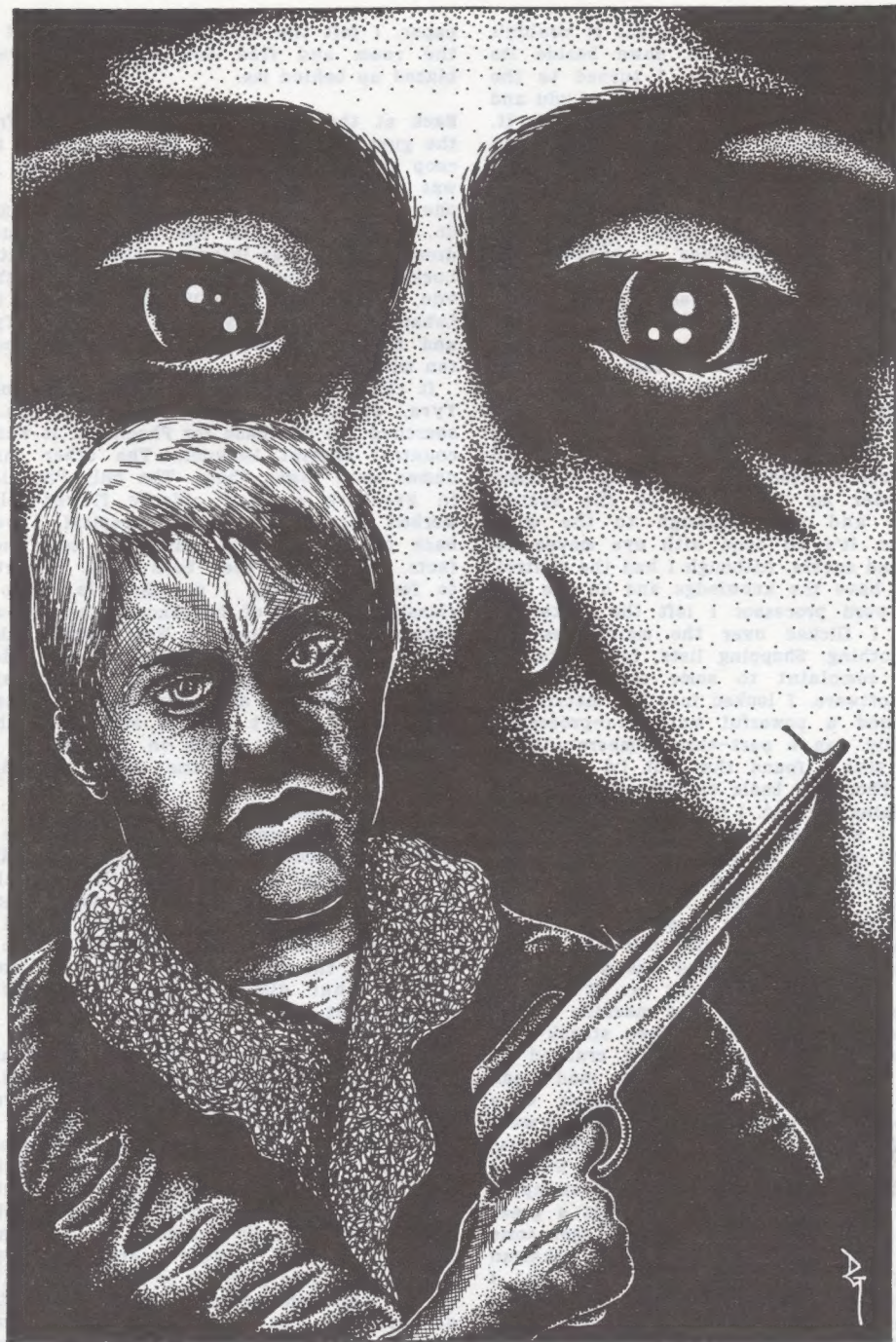
Back at the Firm, I got a lot of shit from the guys. The consensus was she'd flown the coop and made it look like abduction. My job was to prove she'd been napped or bite off one of my fingers, or whatever it is clanmen do. I went down to the library to study, dreading a further interface with a computer. Luckily it's about an eon old, equipped with a vdu, k-board and MS-DOS. First lead was the Lebanese father, very rich, sons called Tyre and Sidon. The keyword search took about ten minutes.

It came up with one guy. With three sons, Tyre, Sidon and Byblos; no daughters. I searched the database for Phoenicia. It was a country: ancient Lebanon. The other three names were towns there. The only Phoenicia in Freeport was an elderly flower-seller worked outside the London Hospital. I went back to the Leb guy, called up some more facts. Byblos had been born blind. I started to feel sick again; I got Specialists to do a classified search of bodyshops. Sure enough Byblos had gone into a West German shop seven years ago. The Morphogenetic Field chosen had been Rita Vanita, a solido star with no brains and an unbeatable body. The Y chromosome doesn't give a shit when that morphogenetic field comes on. He went in an adolescent boy and came out a beautiful woman.

I took a week off.

When I felt clean again, I picked up a needle-gun some callous bastard in Supplies had thought up. It fired little darts containing a South American viper venom, stops your heart instantly and hard to find at postmortem. Trouble was, you had to fire it right into the heart where there was some enzyme that dissolved the Safe-T-Kote. Otherwise it was useless. But I intended to get that close.

I tried Zentrum again. That was her haunt, and if she was free she'd go back there. I wandered along Film Street trying to avoid the stray dogs, wondering why there were so many. Last year it had been Natokoku drifters, this year dogs. They were fighting over fastfood cartons; one particularly juicy styrofoam box of Sushi'n'chips was being eaten and fiercely defended by a skinny alsatian. A crowd of dogs - and cats - was waiting for it to give up so they could move in on the remnants. I shouted and the alsatian fled; but the hungrier shapes moved in. One was familiar: it was the Hermes



vanity case. It looked starved and matted, but it was bravely fighting the cats and nipping the fish with its tiny needle-sharp teeth, minuscule brown eyes glittering in its fur. I called it, but it didn't come. It looked up at me.

"I starving," said the Hermes.

Nuada apparently had an easy facility with everything in the world that made my flesh crawl. I was beginning to find this case - not the vanity case, the criminal case - too much for me. And I found the sight of a wild handbag disturbing. They might take over. I felt that I'd been given an insight into the horrors of the future. You could write an SF novel. "I'll feed you," I said. "I'll take you back to Phoenixia."

"I starving. Phoeni gone."

I reached down and picked up the exhausted case, ran to the kebab stall on Berwick Street and got them to liquidise a hamburger. I must have looked stupid, a middle aged conservatively dressed guy carrying a muddy but expensive furry pocketbook. I put the mush into a piece of paper folded like an icing-utensil, cut off the corner and forced the mush into its mouth as I walked home. If it'd been a real animal, the force feeding would have killed it, but it was a pound of flesh and fur with a cat's brain grafted over an aluminum skeleton. It had no real stomach, and the hamburger saved it. Specials mocked up the frequency spectrum of Nuada's voice from my memory. The synthesiser ordered the Hermes to open, and it did so, almost whining with pleasure at hearing its owner again. The case had the diary and address data I wanted. It didn't take an hour to crack the trapdoor code and access the info. The little screen sang like bird, pouring the data into the big banks of the Bolis computer.

Two hours later, the correlations came through. I was sitting in a supremely uncomfortable modern chair with a glass of wine containing a fading glowball the case had given me. The case was sat on my knee with its eyes closed. Its cat brain was purring, though its body didn't respond. The computer confirmed that Nuada was mixed in some Triad business; they control a lot of pornographic publishing and don't like rivals. There was a seventy percent probability that Nuada was floating face down in the Estuary at this moment. I closed the book on her and went home. Though I rather hated the Hermes, I couldn't throw it out to starve, so I took it home to my little Isle of Dogs Apse. It could eat my left-overs and I might even learn to groom it. I could always give it to a

girlfriend.

It was about a week later some eagle-eyed creep in Monitoring Faxed me an account of a new illegal publishing scam. A very bold and corrupt soul had beamed filth into thousands of households by hacking the post office Fakscontroller. Instead of broadfaking the morning Governors' Paper, the biggest selling morning newspaper, it had broadfaked an abridged version of '1984'. It was stunning audacity. One of the principal books of the Banned Years was now sitting on every breakfast table in Freeport. It had come to me because the Publisher's Logo was Llud Llaw Ereint. It meant FA to me, frankly, but the sender had thoughtfully appended a bit of ancient history; Llud Llaw Ereint was the same god as Nuada Argetlam, but with a Welsh tinge. The Hermes had been whining about never seeing Phoenixia. I picked it up and put it into a paper parcel with just its eyes showing. Before I got out of the door, another Faks arrived. I picked it up; they always seem urgent even though they're normally just circulars. It was a sound recording: the Beatles' White Album. We'd done the lyrics at Bolliscollege. I broke it in two. I didn't need to read the amended publisher's logo.

I picked up the needlegun and left. On the way to The Signifier, the bar where she'd hung out, I pieced it together. She'd fooled us with the fake addresses and diary. They must have been written after she'd knocked me on the head. She'd callously thrown the Hermes onto the streets to starve, knowing that I'd call it if I saw it, and would take the evidence as proof that she was dead. The harmless computer in her flat was a front; it really had only contained letters and shopping lists. The hundreds of banned books, records and films were in her abdominal computer. She could walk into somewhere, plug in her interface probably in the prosthetic eye or hand and fill the databank with freespeech. No-wonder we'd never monitored a thing on the bulletin boards and satellite channels. She physically carried the material, like a Typhoid Mary.

I was steaming with hate by the time I got to the bar. Not only could she publish old books from the Banned Years, but her friends were probably even now writing destabilising propaganda that she could publish. Hacking Faks was a big move. Before, only people who knew of and wanted this stuff in their homes could get it over some private modem line. And we could bust them. Now, if we found filth someone could just say it came out of

the Faks when they ordered Captain Futurity's Weekly Funnies.

I stormed onto The Signifier's dance-floor. Deviants scattered. I glared around more for effect than anything. It was too dark to see. I headed toward the bar. Suddenly the case under my arm tried to jump out.

"Phoeni!" it shouted.

There was a stir in the bar. A shot. Some goon had shot the Hermes. It wasn't Nuada. Her vat-slowed reactions had not allowed her to move. I watched its little glittering eyes glaze.

"Byebye Phoeni," it said, and went limp. At least, it went limper than before.

I threw it down. The clientele of the bar were all reaching for their guns. I strode up to Nuada and pressed the needlegun against the thin material of her dress. They say that the heart is just below the left nipple on a man. I had to improvise; most men haven't got Nuada's curves. She didn't move, the temporary prosthetic stayed on the bar. Incoherent with rage, I shouted something like, "You! You're not a man, you're not a woman and you're not even a machine!" She said: "You'll never wipe out freespeech, Ad. The combination of the three is too strong."

I shot her. It seemed to have no effect.

She looked pained, worried, surprised and confident in that order. Then she began to slump. I went limp with relief. I forgot about the guns at my back. She fell sideways off the barstool, and crumpled up beside the paperwrapped Hermes.

I fled, catching an explosive slug in the shoulder, hence the prosthetic arm. It still gives me nightmares. I can imagine the silicon creeping up the nerves, influencing my brain. I've considered a vat, but the thought of a year 'dead' scares the shit out of me. I might have to meet my maker. What would I say? Anyway, the Firm doesn't pay that kind of private medicine bill.

I might have got over it by now if it weren't for two things: Firstly, Fakes all over town are still delivering uncertificated sound and text and no-one knows how it's being hacked. Secondly, I saw a biography of the solido star Rita Vanita last week. It said that she died in an accident when a vehicle's autodocor failed to save her after a crash. It injected stimulant into the left lung instead of the heart. See, she was 'the world's most famous dextrocardial'; in other words, her heart was on the right side of her chest.

THE END

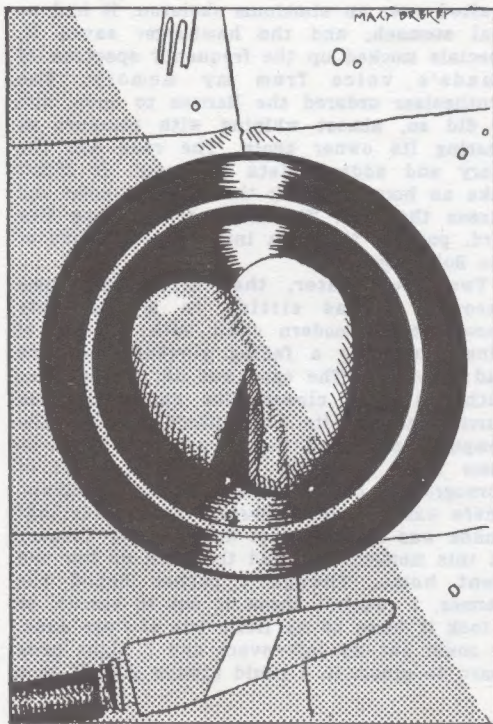
So Why Do I Need You?

If Life is a banquet
then sometimes I feel as if
I've never received an invitation,
but when I'm with you
I feel as if I'm really partaking;
really tearing into those
mounds of good things
at that fabulous feast.

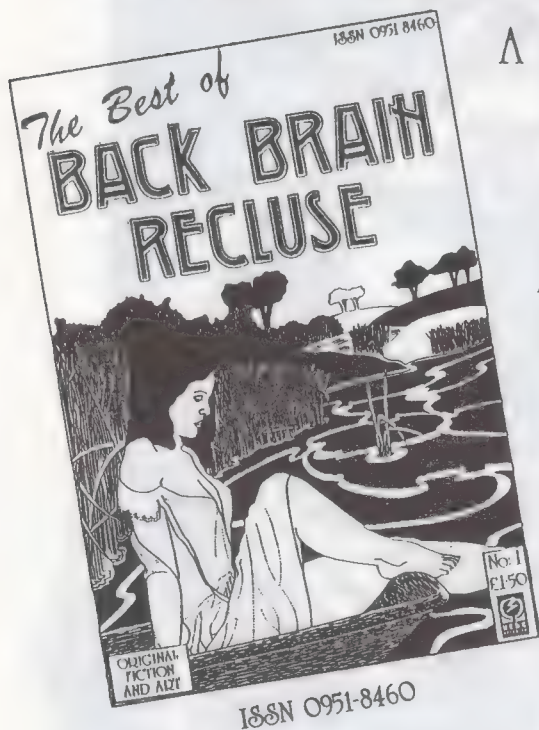
And then when I actually
eat you
I feel I am full of Life;
as you move responsively,
I think Life's Banquet
has come to me
and surrounded me
And you are that fabulous feast.

When I'm without you I feel
like I've been waiting late for supper;
it's long overdue and I'm starving
And I must have you
eat you
love you,
and then when you arrive
I hope you're hungry too.

H. R. Felgenhauer



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THE IDOL IN THE OFFICE

Tom Farbman

What goes on here just goes on. Here! ... The work place ... they call it. I check in incoming freight. So does Morton. And until recently another guy; his name was Randell.

But Randell no longer works here. He left. He said it was getting on his nerves. That sooner or later, "he had to get out of here." That's the kind of person Randell was ... somewhat erratic.

Morton's different. He's dependable. Keeps his feet on the ground. He's known for that.

And it was Morton who found the idol that sits in the bookkeeper's office today. It's right there ... on the shelf above the *No Smoking* sign.

The idol, I call it that, isn't very tall ... maybe two feet; it's made of stone ... it has very short arms and legs and has green eyes with blue circles around them.

Lately, each time I go to that office, to be honest ... it makes me uneasy.

I asked Morton where he got it. He said that "he found it on the way to work." However, he then changed his story, he said maybe it wasn't that way, that "maybe it (the idol) had found him, that it was out there just waiting to be found ..."

The way Morton tells it, it's like the idol didn't exactly turn up by accident. I wouldn't disagree with him, in fact, I think it's a bad omen.

Our boss is a fellow everyone calls ... The Old Hand. Most of us feel that he would be a very difficult person to replace. He knows all the stock numbers by memory. No, no one could fill the Old Hand's shoes.

He works in the office next to the bookkeeper's. They say he's become very fond of the idol. Some people even go so far as to say that it's his friend.

Yesterday ... something happened in the bookkeeper's office. It only increased my apprehension concerning the idol.

The bookkeeper, her name is Jean, must have stepped out. For some reason, I had an impulse to go in there and say a word or two to that little statue.

However, before I could think of anything appropriate to say to it, Jean returned.

"What are you doing in here?" she said.

"I just wanted to ask the idol something," I

answered.

She didn't act surprised. She just sat down at her desk and said, "Alright, don't mind me."

However, then it didn't seem to make sense. Talking to an idol ...

It was as if the moment shifted back to normal.

"Stuffy in here, isn't it," Jean said.

"Yeah it is," I agreed.

Then, as we were talking, the Old Hand walked in.

He walked right over to the idol and said, "How you doing."

Then he said to Jean, "Has anybody tried to communicate with ..." pointing to the idol.

"No just you," Jean said.

He didn't accept that though. And he said, "How about you?" in an angry tone to me.

"No, I don't waste my time talking to idols," I answered.

The Old Hand then shouted, "Why the hell don't you ... don't you believe in human sacrifice?"

"Huh?" I answered.

"Don't act stupid," he said ... then added, "What happened to Randell, why did he quit?"

"I don't know," I said.

But meanwhile, it was like the idol was moving toward me.

Just as the Old Hand was returning to his office, the little stone hands of the idol grabbed me by the throat.

I thought I was going to lose consciousness, but then Jean was asking me some questions. "How many hours did you work last week? Didn't you miss a day the second week of the month? When do you want to take your vacation, July or August?"

I wanted to answer. Finally, I managed to struggle free of the idol's grip. In fact, I threw it. But it didn't land on the floor. No. It was right back on the shelf above the *No Smoking* sign.

"July," I managed to say.

She said she didn't blame me. Sometimes, "the sooner the better."

"Be careful," she said as I shut the door.

THE END

CHECKMATE

Benson Herbert

Tense excitement pervaded the observation dome of the radio telescope high up in the Himalayas. For centuries astronomers had awaited alien signals from space, without success. But now at last something was coming in, not from any terrestrial or lunar source, that could denote intelligence.

Sinpung, the current Superulo, paced nervously to and fro, and spoke to Lingpee, his blonde assistant, who was seated at the computer control console.

"Are we being deluded, or is this the real thing?"

"Could be," she replied non-committally, "but it bothers me that we can't locate the source. Like cosmic rays, they appear to be coming in from all directions at once, on two different modulated frequencies. The spectral characteristics are quite different from those of pulsars, which at one time were thought to be intelligible signals. So where are the aliens? Everywhere?"

"Remind me what we've found so far."

"Both frequency bands start and stop together," she replied, "then after a variable interval, they repeat the first of each of the two sequences, with another repeat later. Then come new sequences with repeats as before."

"And there no correlation between the two

sets of patterns? I mean, comparing those on one frequency with the other."

"Only that they start and stop at the same moment. But the computer is still analysing them. They are frequency-modulated, and both have the same intensities no matter where the radial array points. They either come from all parts of the cosmos, or from a universe outside ours, arriving here by 4D."

This conversation was halted by the sudden arrival of Verulam, an astrophysicist. "Saturn and its rings," he gasped, "they've been occluded!" His voice rose to a squeak. "Just when our Saturn monitor has been withdrawn for servicing!"

A voice issued from the computer deck: "Gravity waves are being registered by the gravito-radiation orbital tracker - stand by for video display -"

A jerky rhythm appeared on one of the screens.

"Display any correlation between the gravity waves and the radio waves," the Superulo commanded.

"No correlation for the gravity waves," the computer responded, "but the radio frequencies show possible digital patternings if displayed perpendicular to each other."

A square grid appeared on the screen, each side divided into thirteen subdivisions, making

169 squares in all. A variety of differently coloured symbols were hopping rapidly amongst the squares. Were they forming a pictogram?

Lingpée recorded the sequences, with slow-motion on a second screen, and freeze-frame on a third. The three gazed incredulously at the frozen frame. The symbols were recognisable but simplified chess-pieces. (The original eight-sided chess-board had long been abandoned on Earth as being too boring, to be replaced by a thirteen-sided board, each team with one king, two queens, four knights, two bishops, four castles, and thirteen pawns.)

The Superulo took a deep breath. "Why should the aliens transmit chess sequences? I suppose they could have picked them up from the daily broadcasts of games and championships that go on all over the world ..."

"Perhaps," interposed the girl, "they imagine that chess is our principal pre-occupation - as I suppose it is - so they are using chess as a means of communication?"

"Allen gamesmanship," contributed Verulam. "Maybe their civilisation is based more on art and games rather than science, and having studied us closely, they imagine we think likewise ..."

The chess sequences abruptly halted, to be replaced by shifting diagonals of symbols.

"They are building up a grammar using chess moves as a basis," broke in the computer. "If they continue, I can soon decode, and present messages!"

The news was flashed round the world; computers rapidly construed the alien grammar, and soon it became possible to send a response signal from Earth, to indicate that the aliens' messages were being received. The terrestrials used a slightly different frequency to those used by the aliens. After a short delay, showing that the signal source was quite close to Earth, the aliens replied, and a two-way communication was set up. Pictograms were used, as attempts with modulated audio signals were not successful. Before long, the aliens began to send printed English characters on to the video screen. These were relayed world-wide to enthralled billions of people.

The terrestrials dubbed the alien world as Chessania, a name which the aliens readily adopted. They appeared to be totally game-aligned, in all their concepts. But when the terrestrials tried to obtain a picture of the alien entities, they sent only images of chessmen. On asking for a description of the alien world, all that was received was the

image of the chess-board grid. No one could guess whether this was concealment, or lack of comprehension.

Computers found that the Chessanian signals were emanating from some 4D source intersecting the space around the Earth in the form of a hollow sphere enclosing the Earth at a height of some two thousand miles. Ships proceeding from Earth to Moon suffered only a short radio blackout when they passed through the 4D zone. The occlusion of Saturn had been caused by the aliens' first attempt to create a 4D zone by gravity waves - the 4D beam had missed its target.

Then came a startling new development. The Chessanians offered to conduct a game of chess with the best players of Earth as the competing team. As at this date the people of Earth were all chess-mad, the offer was accepted with enthusiasm, and hundreds of applications were received from people anxious to compete against the aliens.

The Cosmic Chess Game, as it was called, took three months to reach a conclusion. Earth never stood a chance: the alien team moved their four knights to an impregnable position, all supporting each other around the centre of the board, and advanced their pawns inexorably, scarcely using their two queens until the last few moves. Each move on the screen automatically moved a real piece on a real board at the Earth end.

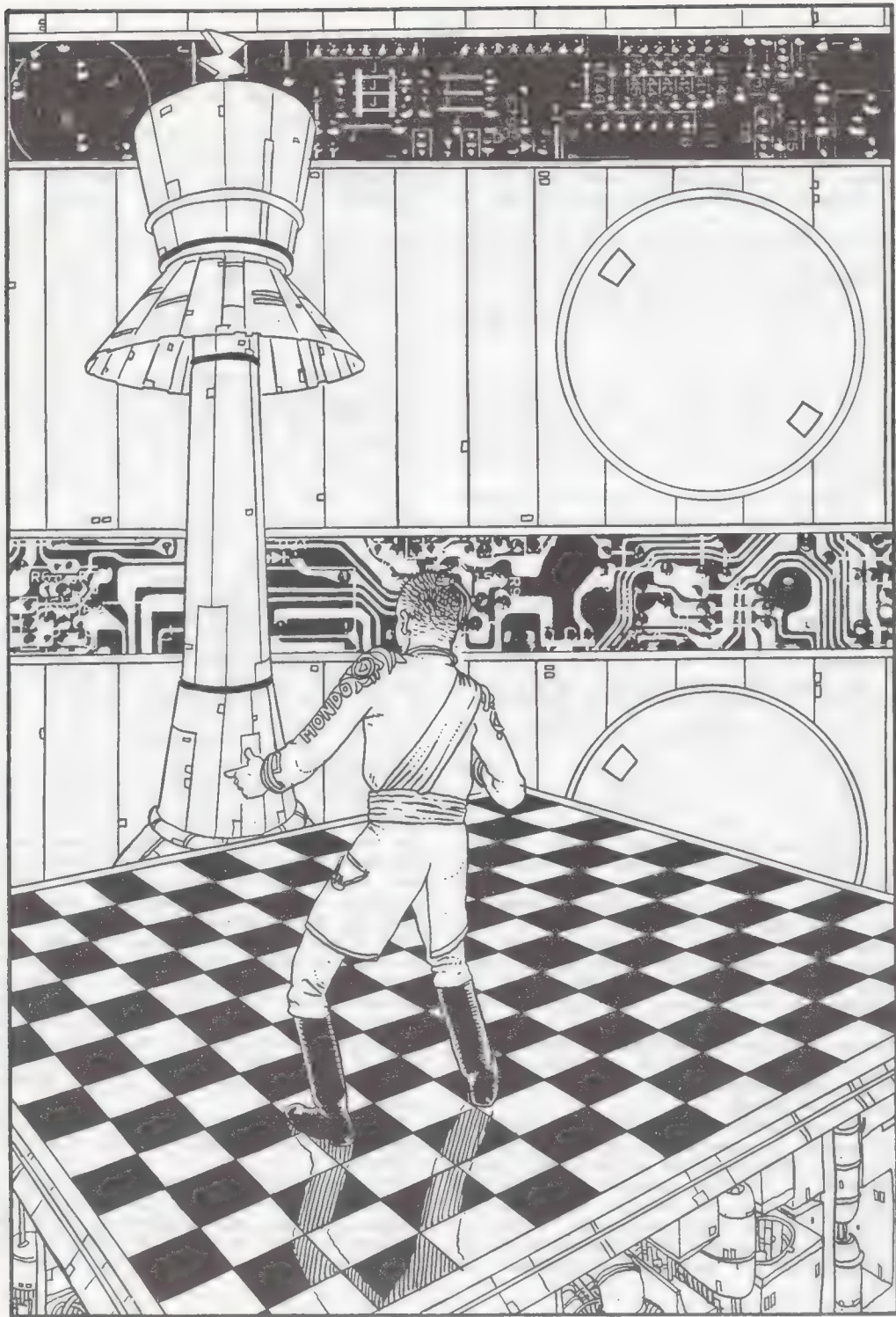
Finally the aliens flashed the signal "CHECKMATE", followed by "Thankyou for a good game". The terrestrial team was not too disappointed, as they scarcely expected to win against a race of such evident superiority; on the contrary, it was hoped that an analysis of the chess sequences would prove illuminating and beneficial to the future of chess. Moreover, was not this peaceful contest a good sign of co-operation and friendliness?

For a month, the analysis of the game, and speculations arising therefrom, were top news.

Then came a startling, if not perturbing, announcement from Chessania: they were seeking permission to visit Earth, in order to claim the victor's prize - the actual King-piece - which they had fairly won. This led to much discussion, some of an alarmist nature.

Lingpée in particular expressed concern: "At least delay them somehow to give us time to consider ..."

"We can't delay too long," the Superulo pointed out. "It would not appear very friendly. Besides, having given us notice in advance, gives us time to prepare any defenses if we wish."



After some further heated argument, permission was transmitted to Chessania. But not long afterwards, Verulam, who had been carrying out research into the intricacies of the aliens' language, came up with a startling idea. He had realised that there could be some ambiguity: it was not clear whether the aliens wished to claim the King piece or the Superulo himself.

"They can't possibly mean me," the Superulo rejoined, for the first time showing slight nervousness. "They must mean the King-piece on the master chess-board that was televised to them."

"How do we know?" demanded Lingpee. "We know nothing about them apart from chess, we don't even know their shape or size ..."

"In my opinion," interjected Verulam, "they probably view evolution itself from the point of view of gamesmanship. Is not the jostling of molecules to get into their places in organic macro-molecules, a kind of game, with its own rules? They may well regard you, Superulo, as representing the chess King - the King and yourself may be identical concepts to them. Their grammar is completely bound up with chess, and perhaps other games - by all signs so far, chess is their only reality."

"They must have some scientific concepts," laughed the Superulo, "to have achieved 4D transmission - and presumably a type of spaceship to enable them to visit us! All the same, we'd better take some discreet precautions."

The news of the aliens' proposed visit was released to the world. Excitement mounted, while secretly a sharp lookout was maintained, with weapons held in readiness in case of invasion. Orbiting satellites were set up between Earth and the 4D zone, armed but ostensibly for observational purposes only. It was agreed that the aliens should land at the spaceport adjoining the Superulo's Himalayan base. In underground bunkers surrounding the spaceport, deadly weapons could be triggered at any moment. A platoon of men with laser guns kept out of sight inside the spaceport control tower.

Three days passed before one of the satellites signalled the appearance of an object, heading for Earth, having materialised in the 4D zone. Soon the object could be seen on the video screen. At this point, Lingpee lost her nerve and begged the Superulo to strike at once before it was too late.

Her chief refused, pointing out that the aliens had had ample opportunity to invade, while the prolonged chess game was in

process.

The object entered the Earth's atmosphere and a magnified image was televised world-wide. All but Verulam were astounded to see that the ship was in the form of a chess piece - the Queen!

"I expected something like this," he said calmly. "Now you see what I mean - they think only in terms of chess!"

Plunging headfirst through the atmosphere without pause, the Queen-ship showed no signs of overheating. Tension increased when soon it could be seen with the naked eye, turning round to bring the Queen's crown upwards and slowly settling to land gently at the Spaceport. No retarding jets could be picked out.

Probing rays had already established that there were no signs of anything resembling weapons aboard. During the flight, Verulam had put subtle questions to the aliens to try to discover if they possessed concepts such as weapons and war. The aliens had replied, with an air of mystification, that they presumed 'war' meant a game of chess, and the pieces were the 'weapons'.

The Superulo and his staff made up a welcoming committee at the Spaceport, covered by the hidden guards in the control tower. After the landing, nothing happened for several minutes, then slowly a ramp opened at the side of the vessel.

"Now we'll see what they look like!" muttered Verulam. "They sent a Queen-ship because it was one of the queens which finally performed the check-mate. So the Queen has come to claim her captive - the King ..."

Ten minutes passed and still nothing took place; no signals had appeared on a screen set against a wall of the control tower. The Superulo began to walk across the distance of a hundred yards separating him from the ship.

The girl pulled him back: "Don't go - it's a trap!" But he shook her off and strolled purposefully towards the ramp. The others followed halfheartedly then stopped halfway, fidgeting nervously. Why had no aliens emerged? At the foot of the ramp, the Superulo paused and turned to wave, then set foot on the ramp. He slowly but steadily ascended the ramp, hesitated slightly on reaching the top, then continued into the interior of the vessel and was lost to sight. After a long pause, he had not re-appeared.

"I don't like this," exclaimed the girl, and waved her arm towards the control tower, from which emerged the guards with laser guns raised. At that moment, the Superulo emerged, alone, coming a short distance down

the ramp, and beckoning to his associates to ascend the ramp. Hesitatingly they did so, while the guards maintained their positions.

At the top of the ramp, where the Superulo waited, Lingpee asked: "Why haven't they come out yet?"

"The ship's empty," was the astounding reply. "No signs of life - nothing. But follow me inside."

Within, a violet glow illuminated the hollow interior. A screen suddenly lit up at the far end. On approaching closer, they saw words on the screen: *"Checkmate. For presentation to losers, press blue button."*

The Superulo's companions crouched in alarm as he immediately pressed it. Tiers of shelves suddenly rose from the floor right down the length of the ship. The shelves, six tiers high, bore thousands of chessmen, average height two inches, complete games set up in starting positions on metal boards. On each board, the two opposing sides were distinguished by their colour, a self-luminous red for one set, yellow for the other. Mystified and intrigued, the humans cautiously handled the pieces. They were of some smooth metal, warm to the touch, and resisted if pulled upwards but easily slid sideways. They must have had magnetic bases.

"They seem to be harmless enough," said the Superulo, "and there's nothing to be done here, apparently. Let's carry say ten boards to the tower, then we can have the metal analysed, and arrange for the others to be distributed to laboratories in selected countries."

The company trooped out with ten sets, leaving the ramp open as they could find no means of closing it. Sating a glance back towards the screen as he left, the Superulo saw the words: *"Take sets to all who have collaborated in the championship match, as a memento ..."*

The Superulo and Lingpee took one set each to their rooms at the adjoining base, for overnight observation. They turned on their videos, but the screens remained blank. Messages had been transmitted to Chessania, acknowledging the arrival of the ship.

The Superulo could scarcely sleep in the eery glow of the chessmen. Then he dozed off, to be awakened suddenly, imagining he had heard a furtive rustling noise like mice. Not seeing any source of sound, he tried to sleep again, in which he had a brief disturbing dream in which the knights turned out to be Trojan horses. The rustling began again, and he realised it was coming from the chessboard. He pulled up a chair, to keep it under close observation, then jumped up in

alarm as he realised the sound was the slithering noise of a pawn moving from one square to another. Running to the girl's room, he found she had made a similar discovery.

"All the pieces are playing chess, by themselves," she gasped, pointing at the screen, which announced: *"Celebration Ritual"*. On an impulse she opened the window and they became aware of a growing tumult coming from the ship. Evidently all the sets were playing a chess game. Guards came running out of the control tower in confusion.

"They are moving very rapidly," muttered the Superulo. "Let's wait and see what happens when the game finishes."

The guards, alarmed by the increasing tumult from the ship, had turned on floodlights, keeping a respectful distance from the ship, with their guns at the ready. The rapid playing of hundreds of games of chess was causing the Queenship to vibrate.

The pieces on the girl's board came to a halt with the checkmate. Then came an odd squeaking noise and each piece appeared to broaden, gradually extending until it was in two halves joined by a ribbon-like attachment. These attachments suddenly snapped, leaving in each case two identical pieces side by side.

"Mitosis!" exclaimed the Superulo. "Cell division - reproduction!"

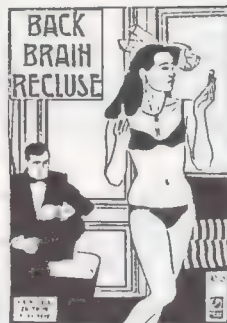
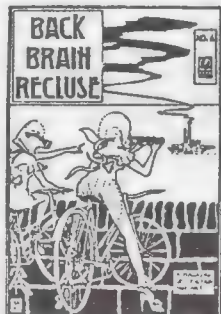
"Perhaps the pieces are the aliens - maybe camouflaged?"

Now the pieces were changing their colours through all the spectrum, and seemed to be covered by a moist sheen. The Superulo stroked his finger along one piece and tasted a drop of the moisture - "Pleasant, sweet, warm ..."

"It's alcoholic," said the girl, sniffing, "and they're splitting again! Look out of the window, the whole field's covered by them - they've come down the ramp, and rapidly dividing!" The room reeked with intoxicating fumes. They both felt euphoric, their spirits soared, they touched hands and laughed, stumbling drunkenly into the corridor, to be joined by Verulam in a similar state. All three staggered out into the field, to join the guards who were merrily kicking up clouds of chessmen. The latter appeared to have sprouted tiny vanes, and were taking off, helped by alcoholic jets at their bases. Mitosis continued at increasing speed, one made two, two made four, four eight ...

The carpet of joyously dancing chessmen covered the entire field up to the humans' waists; ripples crossed the carpet and they began to rise in groups, spreading in all

BACK ISSUES



#1 : SOLD OUT

#2 : SOLD OUT

#3 : SOLD OUT

#4 : SOLD OUT

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#8 : Steve Sneyd, Wayne Rile Williams, Mark Iles, John Light, Wayne Allen Sallee, Ray Jon, Geoff Stevens, Jouni Waarakangas, Paul Roland, SMS, Michael Cobley, Matt Brooker and Kaiser Bill.

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directions.

The humans began to plunge drunkenly headfirst into the mass and were quickly covered.

Presently the clouds of chessmen darkened the sun. Before dawn, the entire globe was embraced in ecstatic ascending drives. In this manner commenced the invasion of the chessmen.

Sinpung came to his senses, clutching his throbbing head. He tried to focus his eyes, and found Lingpee and Verulam lying nearby. "Wake up!" he called, and they stirred, then all three rose unsteadily to their feet. Nothing seemed visible save bare walls and glowing ceiling.

"Where are we?" exclaimed the Superulo.

"We're inside the alien ship," replied Lingpee. "But where are the chessmen?"

Verulam went to the rear and tried to open the ramp without success. "We're locked in here, but why?"

The vessel lurched and suddenly they lost weight, rose into the air, spinning and tumbling as they tried to steady themselves.

"Free fall!" gasped Lingpee. "We've left Earth - where are they taking us?"

"To Chessania, obviously," responded Verulam. "I was right, they regard you, Superulo, as the equivalent of the chess King-piece which they came to capture!"

"But why include you and Lingpee?"

"Could be as part of your entourage, to make you feel less isolated ..."

"The reason's on the screen," interrupted the girl, pointing.

"NEEDED AS SPECIMENS TO ANALYSE"

"Analyse?" responded Sinpung to the screen. "For what purpose?"

"WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND YOU, TO UNDERSTAND OURSELVES"

Sinpung, gesticulating exasperatedly, turned to his two companions: "Verulam, will you talk to them? I can't make anything out of this nonsense!"

"It can only mean," replied the philosopher, "that the chessmen and ourselves are somehow linked ..."

"Of course we are linked," said the girl impatiently, "as we both use chess as a means of communication ..."

"YOU ARE PART OF OUR DISTANT PAST - WE ARE YOUR DESCENDANTS - PREPARE FOR LANDING"

Light cords suspended from the ceiling slowly descended under weak gravity, and the Terrans grasped these for support. They were scarcely needed, however, as the landing was gentle.

The Terrans stared around, bewildered and apprehensive, for the ship itself had dissolved, opening out into a room of larger dimensions, in fact a cube, with glassy translucent walls, ceiling and floor.

From no visible source came a voice: "We have analysed your vocal mechanism and can now talk in your own language. The atmosphere is adjusted to your requirements."

"Why don't you show yourself," snapped Lingpee. "Are you the same as the tiny chessmen we saw in your ship when you landed on Earth?"

"They were only parasites, trained slaves or servants. We are your size." One wall disappeared, to reveal another similar cube beyond it, from which emerged a line of incredible figures, up to six feet in height, shuffling along on tiny feet and wearing cloaks that hid their arms. They resembled the small chessmen who had originally landed in the ship on Earth, save that they possessed three slits on their faces, perhaps representing mouth and two eyes, to judge from their positions.

The Terrans could find no words to say at this confrontation, but huddled close together while the chessmen formed a ring around them. One of the kings in a yellow robe stood forward, announcing: "You may call me King Yellow. We are the product of our ruling principle, Conscious Evolution based on gene manipulation. We have been watching your progress for many millennia and have seen how more and more humans took up the study of chess until the entire population became involved, with prizes offered to the best players who reaped great honour and benefits, not to mention political power. It appeared that Evolution was pointing the way, and we decided to help it along by means of excursions into the past. It is we who planted in your minds the idea of twenty six players as the ideal arrangement. In course of time, most other pursuits were abandoned in favour of chess."

"Chess is based on oligarchy," said Verulam suspiciously, "with royalty at the highest level and pawns at the lowest. Could this not lead to dictatorship?"

"And why not? It works with optimal efficiency. Utopian ideals, morality, and all such, are now outmoded relics of the childhood of humanity. Art itself was replaced by an aesthetic appreciation of the most ingenious chess moves. As your era happens to be at a critical stage of the process, it is desirable for us to study your psychology and

RABBIT AND HOUNDS

I parked my car on a corner of the road
and started to go to sleep under a blanket.
A van stopped a few yards away,
its back door came open.

I saw men tumbled inside,
all shapes and sizes,
and they saw me,
female, under a blanket.

One, gregarious as a leader,
said, "she should not be parked there."
He stepped down, followed
by guffaws and grunts of pleasure.

His approach, my vulnerability,
the riles of men, my resistance,
bringing from the corners of my mind
a child who ran across the road for rescue.

Then a man approached these tumbled ones,
waiting for my blood before they entered for
the kill.

Another child, another man,
confronted them. I rose and went towards the
van.

"Would you have all raped me?" I asked.
"You left us no option," one replied,
"It's nature. We're all good really."
A handful of mature men from my mind,

and little girls with anger in their eyes,
unloaded them, rounded them up,
and led them away. I stood staring,
(replies braked angrily) at an empty van.

Christine Michael



CATHODE WALTZ

Tim Nickels

The sky bled to black.

Fido Williams stroked his beard in the new shadows. Not thoughtfully. Not a thinker was Fido. Indeed, he was a man to whom a beard would always be a stranger, with its fluff of bits and pieces that didn't join up. But he stroked on as he crossed one of the car parks in the Industrial Estate. He paused by his little grey Hornet and looked around at the cash'n'carries and chewing gum factories. The sky was turning epic in its promise of bad weather, so checking he'd got his pipe he swung into the old car and pulled out the choke, hanging on to it as the spirit of Coventry burst into life.

"Looks like rain," observed Fido to himself. Yes, an observer if not a thinker. He had an eye, had Fido.

He cornered around token foliage and into a side road. Fighting with the choke, he cruised past the cathode factory with its two elegant chimneys, two brothers that remained proud beneath the patina of inaction. The old sign was still there on the gates although obscured now by an oxidising jumble of padlocks and chains: *KO-SUNG CATHODE INC.* Tokyo by way of California and the garden cities. Twelve years at Cathy's. Vacuuming the tubes, they'd say. Up Cathy's, vacuuming. Auntie always said that to people: she was dreadfully proud of him after Mum popped up North.

It was difficult to remember the old Ko-Sung now. Within this swart skeletal framework there existed an environment cleaner than an operating theatre. He could see them on the job at 5 am, relieving the nightmen. He could hear their song. It was wheeled out for visiting Japanese hierarchy – and even occasionally for their own amusement. What were the words? Lovely beat. "... dah, dah-dah, the Cathode Waltz ..." That was the name for it: The Cathode Waltz. The Japs loved that.

Summer rain fell down on Westover. The light industry streets lay shining between glass bunkers. Household names wavered on plastic lawns.

Fido Williams, longest of long term unemployed, turned his dented Wolseley out of the Estate and on to the City road. Juggling between Securicor vans and L-plated mopeds, Fido wrestled with the latest roundabout and spun out at the second exit that took him to the sea.

The wipers whined like living things, the raindrops dropped like they always did. He fumbled for his pipe in his gardening jacket, deftly filled and lit it. He bunged the match out of the window and side-glanced the boarded up betting shop, black bags slit by cats' paws and spilling on to the pavement.

His baccyshop lay a few doors further down, on the corner of his own street. He parked the car by his front gate and started to walk back for some tobacco. He paused and turned back on his heel. Better check and see Sally's okay. He went past his own entrance and moved on to the next one. This was Sally's gate. The two of them had either side of a thirties semi: they both delighted in the wacky stained glass and setting sun motif – an out-of-character artistic indulgence for Fido.

Sally was in the middle of her chaotic garden, hauling down vast, rain sodden sheets from her washing line.

"Alright, Sally?" He called from the street.

"Fine, Bonzo. I just got in ... got to get this stuff indoors ..." She always called him Bonzo: he had a feeling that she was slightly foreign.

"Do you need a hand, dear?"

"Oh, no – I've got a ... no, no, Bonzo – I'm fine. You get indoors."

Briefly, behind a sheet, Fido detected a movement. He observed ... Was there someone with her? No, surely not. No, he'd been mistaken.

Fido Williams turned once more and slopped down to the Corner Shop, hunched in the downpour.

Doctor Bellcombe, as unsurely bald as Fido was bearded, bent over the magazine racks. He was a man who never tucked his shirt in, being given to wearing those great

wholemeal-coloured curtains that dripping hippies sometimes sleep under. The odd baggy cardigan was sometimes permitted in Winter months, although studiously unbuttoned. Bellcombe was a Cathy man too. But he'd been in research; he'd saved: he had money.

Fido came into the shop, shut the door behind him. "Raining," said Fido.

"Aye, boy, got it right there," reckoned Bellcombe crossing to the counter, stock taking at every pace. He put some sherbet chews back into the box from which they'd fallen. Huge hands, little chews.

"Been up vacuuming memories, Fido?"

"Yeah. Guess so."

"Four years last month. Never been back. Send the lad up to the Cash'n'Carry if I need anything. He says the place is full of cats. Not much else."

"No. Nothing."

"Mind you, more to worry about now." Bellcombe, always a quietly superior man, now fell into his garrulous stride. He conducted with boxes of panatellas.

"I been broke in twice these last three nights. Nothing taken. Stupid. See the new door hinges?"

Fido saw.

"Twice I've had to put them back. But the till's not been touched - not much in there at night, of course. But the lock hasn't even been tampered with. No fags nicked, no porno - strange for kids. Nothing. Stupid. Oh ..." Bellcombe pauses in his account. "of course, there was *one* thing. Now that *is* nothing, that *is* stupid ..."

He gestured to a small space on a shelf behind the counter, next to the rainbow of cigarette packets. Only a light powdering of shop dust was to be seen, next to the empty aerial socket.

"... Nicked the telly."

Fido smiled shortly. He offered Bellcombe his sympathy, observed and commended the former's prowess as door repairer.

The air was full of moisture as he left the shop. The hot pavement, fed up with rain and glad to be rid of it, sent up a light mist that fell and disappeared down the sewer gratings.

He turned into his front gate. Sally was gone, her footprints picked out in the long grass. He entered the house, locking the door behind him.

In the kitchen, Fido fried up some bread with a bit of streaky and a broken egg. He munched listening to *Woman's Hour*. He washed up to the start of some play about an artist he'd never heard of. The BBC explained that today was the anniversary of the artist's death.

"Useful," observed Fido, dumping the drying-up cloth in the laundry basket. "Very useful."

He went into his living room. It was some days until the next Giro so he hadn't bought a paper. He sat down and looked about. He had upon him that emptiness that he'd learnt to accept. He felt like a dried up, thin man. He felt his eyes swing about the familiar room.

There was Auntie's armchair with Auntie's picture beside it. The picture was placed on a sort of linen napkin with embroidered sweet peas around the border. These were Auntie's favourite. What else? The dresser with the old Linn and his jazz records: pretty rare those records - maybe he should sell them ...

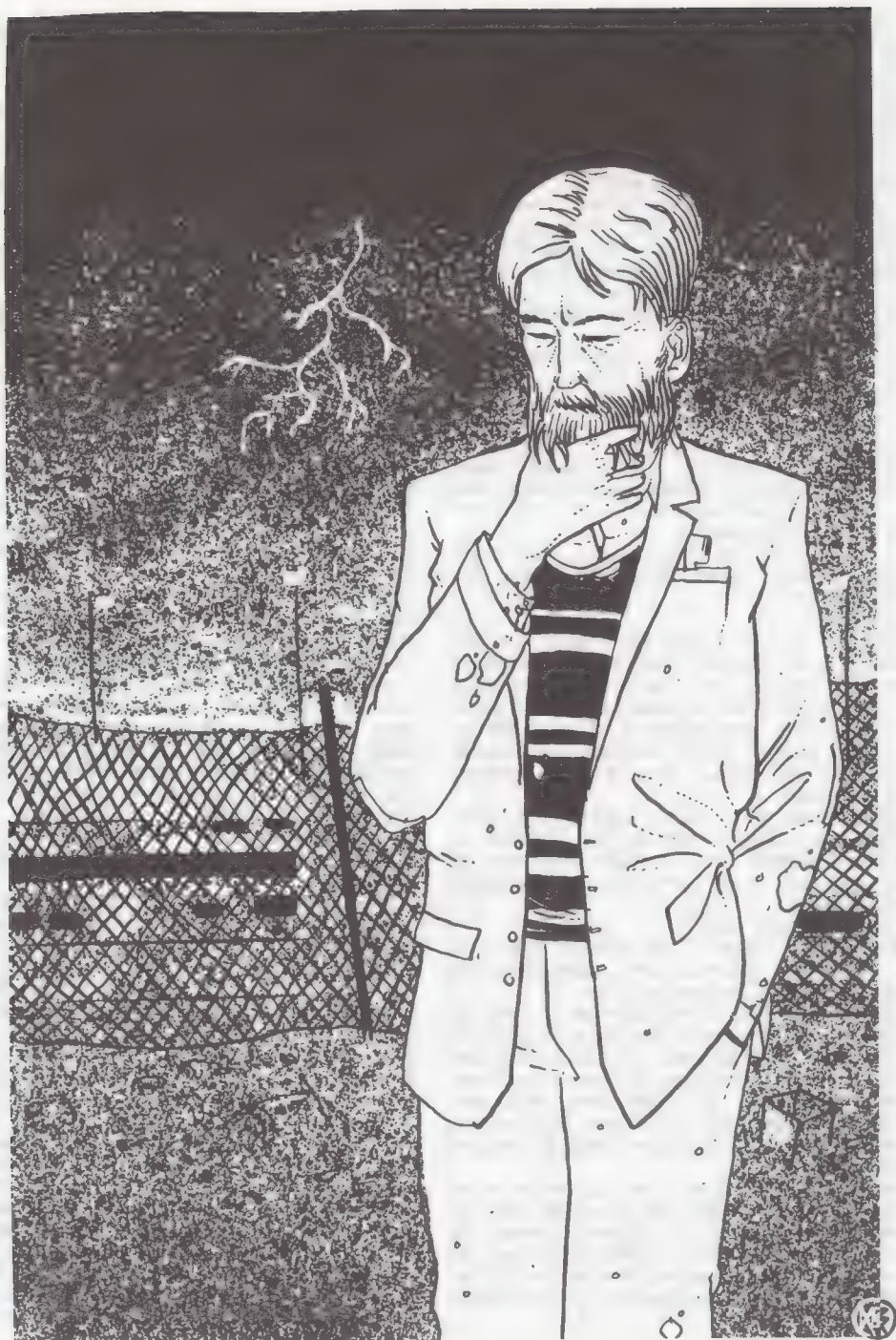
The picture by Turner - all full of the colour that didn't go with the wallpaper. And there was the deserted drinks cabinet, and the writing desk with his riot gun leaning against it. On a loudspeaker, that funny African sculpture returned from National Service by some obscure relation; the coffee table beside him with its electronic magazines and boxes of baton rounds.

He rose and went to the window. The sky was clearing, the sun skimming across Sally's pieces of stained glass. He hoped she would be alright tonight with her lock broken ...

He observed the sun touching and glinting the coloured facets. Not *that* much younger than him, was she? Not that much younger than him. Sally worked down at the Art College. It had been Sally who'd given him the Turner print. (He must remember to ask her about the anniversary artist.) Not a real Turner. She told him Turner died in poverty in Chelsea. It happens to all of us, he supposed.

Fido took an interest in Sally. That's what one would call it. He'd do small things for her. He'd mend her washing line, pretend to do a bit of plumbing. Just little things. And she would have him round for coffee with a few of her students who all peered at him like goldfish peer out of their bowls. Then there were these boyfriends. Ever since the Blackout four years ago, she'd had these violent boyfriends. Every so often some bloke - burnt, wounded and of Sally's slight acquaintance - would pound upon her door at 5 am ... A brief exchange - Sally's beautiful voice and the blood-filled tones of her nocturnal visitor - then the taking in, the bathing, the bedding, the ejection at dawn ...

Fido paused in his observation. Sally had taken in a boy in the early hours *this* morning: he'd heard the screams from next door. She had helped her visitor in - a sharp



and brittle clatter on the garden path - and the front door had closed.

The man must have departed very early. Fido still retained his old Ko-Sung rising habits, still did his kamikaze exercises. The kid must have left before the night was properly over. Before the birds, their call recently so uncertain. Indeed, the tiny finches - as he had observed of late ... had observed ...

His mind racing, he flung open his front door, vaulted the chicken wire that separated his house from Number Seventeen. Disentangling himself from a rosebush, he crossed the overgrown lawn - stopped, looked down, observed ... By the clothes line, the low light picked out two sets of footprints amongst the shaggy blades of grass. Fido's sheet lurker was flesh and blood, after all.

He walked back to the path and picked up the police truncheon that lay there. He dropped it with a clatter brittle and sharp. A couple of matronly gossipers paused in mid-torrent, turned and looked, resumed their conversation on the other side of the street.

Fido left the truncheon and touched the front door. It swung open. A movement caught his eye. A bluebottle flew down Sally's hallway and buzz sawed into late Summer. The door swung shut: he pushed it once more, thinking about Doctor Bellcombe and his telly nickers.

He stopped at the hat stand, its sole occupant a sailor's cap encircled with Spanish: more booty from the forgotten war.

In the kitchen, a drawer had been pulled out and dropped on the lino scattering cutlery in a silvery gush. A small box room proved to be the store for Sally's canvases. They were mostly figurative works with a few coastal landscapes - as Fido observed, somewhat guiltily turning over the frames that faced the wall. There were quite a number of pictures and Fido kept flipping them over, hypnotised by their colour and the wooden tap as each picture fell upon its predecessor. About seven canvases down he found Sally in a T-shirt with her throat cut. The T-shirt had a picture of that bloke with all the arms and legs they used to have on *World in Action*. At first, he thought it was another of Sally's pieces: but quietly he realised the presence of dark liquid, the gentle female torso, the bare bruised legs.

He put the pictures back and closed the door. He went quickly upstairs and looked into each of the rooms. Bath and loo, Sally's studio overlooking the distant docklands, her bedroom. He went back to the studio. Peeking around the doorframe, Fido could see the

policeman. He was lying on the couch where Sally sometimes placed her models. He had his arm in a sling, a kitchen knife tucked into the bandage. The man was staring into the corner by the window. Fido came close, stroking his beard. The policeman looked up and turned back to the corner. Fido drew up a chair next to his companion, settled back.

He plays his room searching game again. He searches for the bluebottle's brothers and sisters. And he searches his memory:

There are the virgin overalls and the robot arms. There are the shining screens on their work benches, giant mirrored bluebottle eyes. But there is something different on Cathy's shop floor. The sterile air had been cut to shreds by cologne and the fragrant leather insteps of government ministers. They are trailed by a chorus of worried Japs, subdued for once and silent. A minister with particularly fragrant feet steps forward. He slimes and slithers into his speech. He rundowns the history of our industry. Ally Pally and the Spysat leak. The violence and the sex. The black and the white. The masonic and profane. He tells about the Experiment. The Great Experiment. The Noble Experiment. And the minister smiles (such a piercing expression that Fido attempts to reproduce it in Sally's studio four years later: a curious kind of off-planet leer) - the minister smiles and joins in falteringly with the Waltz. It is a tiny tune to Fido now, such a distant, youthful memory:

"... Now we'll dance the cathode waltz,
Vacuum screens and nuts and bolts,
Dance!
Dance!
Dance the Ko-Sung go some cathode

waltz ..."

Everyone is singing in Fido's head, all the white clad singers. Doctor Bellcombe, on the verge of tears, singing, singing as he activates the sequence that will shut the factory down forever ...

Fido returned to himself. He observed the staring policeman, observed his watch, the glass set alight by sunlight.

Outside, the afternoon was slipping into August dusk. The commuters rumbled by on the main road, intent for home. They would be greeted by their wives and children. They would tenderly enquire as to when dinner would end. Throwing on riot gear and smashing the ends off Martini bottles, they would step once more into the street and join the thousands jogging into the city centre. Appointing their commanders for the night, the armies would raise their flags on multi-storey carparks; spray-can their slogans

across deserted cinema screens. Platoons of fake TV reporters haunted the bingo battlefields; counterfeit weathermen, magnetic symbols held aloft, ran screaming through shopping arcades and into the countryside beyond.

Every night the frenzied whisper of the city centre sauntered like a ghost out to the suburbs. Every night the sky glowed with something more than street lighting. It was as if the whole world had stepped out of time. And around this new world there orbited the police cordons: terrified, bureaucracy-ridden, they cowered behind their scrapyard Pandas and piles of dead kittens. They waited in the world without time, wordlessly attending their own wounded and waiting for the world to turn, for dawn, for day ...

"But not for us tonight, eh, constable?" Murmured Fido to his new friend, upstairs in Sally's studio. "Think we'll stay in this evening. Reckon we'll just stick here and watch a bit of telly."

Fido observed himself in the mirror in the corner: watched himself in the grey-green empty screen of the television.

THE END



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A PATRIOT'S PRIDE

I'm a Real American.

Had a direct ancestor on the boat
crossing the Delaware with Washington
one bitter, freedom fighting holiday season.
I used to take these wonderful old photographs
of another distant GrandFather in a bivouac
strategy session with Grant and Lincoln
to school for Show'n'Tell - picture of
another bitter, freedom fighting holiday season presented
during still another bitter, freedom fighting holiday season.
The Christmas Bombings mirrored the Tet Offensive to
those tripped-out guys fighting guerillas in the jungle.

They say we were as far West as Ohio early.
We kind of split into Illinois and Eastern factions.
Mom boasted AmerIndian Blood; GrandFather's GrandFather
came over from Germany, ran the city's waterworks for years.
He died young, of a lead pipe over the head in a Chicago
labor riot. My hometown. My family owned a farm downstate
for over 100 years; I-55 curves round our old fields
because GrandPa was a lawyer and backed down
those Federal Highway Commission boys.
He spurned their money. His divorce made the papers.
He also wrote a guidebook to the 1939 World's Fair as
Corporate Counsel for the Chamber of Commerce, and later became D.A.

My other GrandFather sold mars lights to the armed forces,
played bridge with J. Edgar Hoover; GrandMother was ranked
as a world-class player, and I even had a carazy uncle.
He claimed to have invented the first car radio.
So here I stand well connected, D.A.R. eligible on every side.
Sure Mom committed suicide. Sure her and Dad were alcoholics, but
I'm a Real American. (With ex-con junkies for brothers.)
GrandMa and her five sisters sold the farm when they were very old.
So what if I think it stinks?
Who cares about too many bitter, freedom fighting holiday seasons?
I'm a Real American. (With statistics for sisters.)
And they try to draft me, jail me, break me, corrupt me,
and rip me off everyday.

Now here's another holiday season with war declared on
many diverse elements of our world, and for
Show'n'Tell today I wanna just say, "Screw this."
I'm a Real American. Go suck pond water!"
Keep your sanitized history, yuppie scum, and Star Wars.
My brain is too busy trying to visualize The Ultimate.
Keep your Korean Conflicts, Missile Crises and other childhood terrors.
When I grow up I wanna be an outer space colonist,
or else invisible, or both; I wanna get away and
never get caught; I wanna be guilty as hell and free as a bird.
God, it's great to be a real American,
not like everybody else.

H.R. Felgenhauer



PASSENGER

Something strange happened
When you walked
On the bus,
The driver never
Took your money.
Muddy windows cleaned themselves,
Tickets held people
In their hands,
And torn posters
Patched up their wounds.
As you moved
Down the gangway,
The gossip needle
Left its record,
Cigarette ash hid
Behind seat supports,
And four out of five men
Offered you their seat.
I would have
Given mine too,
But as you glided
Closer through the tunnel,
A ten second hurricane
threw me to the ground,
Ah
But I landed on cushions.

Ray Jon

DREAM THE REAL

SIMON CLARK

"What do you think?"

"Yes." She nodded, her bright eyes fixed on him. "I like it."

He tried to be casual but he knew he was staring. The way she sat, almost folded into the armchair, her bare feet tucked beneath her slim body. Beautiful.

He wondered if he should make his move now. How would she react? Laugh at him? Run screaming from the flat? Something trickled under his shirt. Hell ... He was sweating like a pig.

Big dark eyes. No girl had ever looked at him like that before. And right now he'd never felt like this before.

"Read me another," she said pointing to a mound of magazines on the floor.

He smiled easily. Her interest pleased him. "Sure. Any requests? Some Sneyd? Darlington? Dyer? Almond?"

She hugged her knees to her breasts now. Perfectly. Just to see the curve of her back squeezed out even more sweat to run down his chest.

After a thoughtful pause she said simply: "Darlington."

He picked up a magazine with a distinctive gold-black cover.

"After the Raid." He cleared his throat. "Do you want another drink?"

"No. Just read. Please."

*"After the raid we emerged
to watch the
glass capsules settling like
silt over the city,
and to search out survivors.
We found no-one
but Rimbaud
dancing to
unheard music
on the
street corner."*

"Are those stories?"

He shrugged, smiling, slightly puzzled. "Yeah, sort of." Christ. The things she asked. Sometimes it sounded as if she'd just come down from Mars.

"Who do you suppose writes this? They are so ... so wonderful."

"Just people like you and me." So he could get nearer he crouched beside her and began tidying the magazines. "I've never met any writers, but I don't imagine they live in castles and have strawberries and champagne for breakfast."

"... no-one but Rimbaud dancing to unheard music on the street corner." She rolled the words off her tongue and he saw her skin go gooseflesh, even the tiny black hairs on her bare arm tugged erect.

Nipples go hard. When that happens. Or so he'd read. Ah, you're a loser, David Johnson, he thought, and mercilessly snapped the magazines into neat piles. Twenty-seven years old and this is the nearest you've been to a girl. What have you been doing with your life, man?

She talked about the poetry he'd read to her. Some girl. Most would have run a mile at the cursed word, 'poet'. Who was she anyway? Her name? He rocked back on his heels gazing at her as she spoke in that unusual voice. Soft. Low. Words evenly placed as if talking was something new to her.

He recalled how she'd come to his flat.

As always, like last night and the night before that, going back longer than he wanted to remember, he'd rolled in from work, mechanically eaten (one ham and mushroom pizza, one apple, one mug of tea, white, no sugar). Watched the news. Listened to records (classical and rock). Gone for a long walk (through the deserted town centre to the canal) and returned at last to more

Pink Floyd, Debussey and to read.

His balcony overlooked a delivery area serving shops, a supermarket, and a Chinese restaurant (which was immediately below his flat); even now the smells of frying and spices were sneaking in through an open window somewhere. The delivery area was a bleak place. All brick, concrete, metal skips and silver galvanised bins full of rubbish that seemingly had the power to escape and blow about the concreted ground. There was no greenery, only shades of grey and the insipid yellow of brick walls.

The only people to find it desirable were the town drunks who congregated in a covered area behind the supermarket. There they'd make couches from squashed cardboard boxes and sit and drink themselves from this world to another. One no doubt warm, comfortable, where their companions weren't piss-soaked inebriates but witty conversationalists who spun webs of profound speech.

The drunks were the sole representatives of human life down there at night. After all this time, he knew each one by sight. The old man with bushy ginger hair who repeatedly lurched to his feet to sing opera. The Great Caruso (with the emphasis on Grate). The younger one with the stupid grin who wanted to organise boxing matches. "Queensbury's rules ... Ah said, Queensbury's rules. You stand there. I'll stand here and ... I could've been a boxer yer know, I could've been ..." This would go on until he irritated the little man with one leg so much that there would be a fight. Could've been always came off worse. "Ducking and weaving. 'Arry, you know what I mean, 'Arry. I could've been a boxer. Dance like a butterfly, float like a b ..." One punch and Could've Been lay flat on his back sobbing his heart out.

Yes, he knew them all. He'd watch them for hours, making up names for them, thinking how he'd tell the people at work about them. He never did though.

Then tonight, there had been a newcomer. She sat at the back. Not participating with the drinking, talking, laughing, or dancing, or fighting. At first he thought one had found a girlfriend. Maybe a junkie. She'll let herself be fucked by eight disgusting old drunks just for the price of a fix. That's what he'd told himself.

No. It wasn't that. The drunks packed up and pissed up had vanished by nine. She was still there at half past ten. Alone. In the dark. Sat huddled against the yellow wall dressed in a T shirt and calf-length skirt.

At eleven he had to go out and ask if she

was alright. She'd nodded. She looked lost; the loneliness flared out of her eyes.

"Are you waiting for someone?"

Then she said something that he was sure he'd misheard.

"You, David," she seemed to say. A cold wind blew, rattling the plastic cider bottles round and round the bay. He'd not heard right - that's all.

Carefully he'd explained the way to the YWCA.

But she followed him back to his flat.

He felt her hand on his arm. Her body heat warmed his skin - and something else deep inside.

"Sorry, I was miles away. Right," he tried to sound, none too successfully, both casual and business-like, "what are we going to do with you then?"

She just smiled.

"It's gone midnight. Do you want me to drive you home?"

"David, that's impossible." She squeezed his arm again and smiled. "Read me another story."

"I can't ... sorry. I'm so tired my eyes feel full of grit."

"Then I'll tell you a story."

Sitting on the floor with his back against the chair, he let her talk, so close he could smell her subtle musk scent.

"This is a story I've heard many times before. There are dozens of variations. But basically the stories are the same. Two men. They are linked by a single bond. Some have said they were brothers, or even lovers. Certainly their minds were entwined more tightly than any lover's limbs. The truth of the matter is that one of the men died before the other was even born.

"The first lived in a remote cottage in the Highlands of Scotland. At this time there was war and the papers were full of names like Flanders, Somme, Passendale."

"The First World War?"

"The second man, he was an administrator in the Parks Department of a Town Council in the North of England. He moved his family and furniture into a large house in the suburbs on the day he heard on the radio that a Soviet rocketship had carried something called a Sputnik into the sky."

"1957," said David. "October."

She rested her hand on his shoulder and his heart beat harder.

"I'll tell you about the Council clerk first," she said, "it doesn't matter which comes first. The men's spirits were mirrors of each other, their souls vibrated with the same rhythm. They shared the same fantasies. Both would



MAXA BRLEY

spend moody evenings staring at the walls of their homes, or they would try to exhaust themselves with long walks."

Gradually, he leaned back until her leg pressed against his shoulder. He said:

"And this is the story you've heard before?"

"Many times. I've travelled a long way, David. And tonight, I heard it from those men on the steps." Unconsciously, she stroked his hair as she spoke. "Basically the Council clerk was a lonely man. He had a wife and two sons. But he didn't feel as if he really knew them. He couldn't talk as a father to his children. The new house was his sole distraction. It had a large garden. On one border rose hedging ran its full length. Overgrown, it hadn't been pruned in years. By the Spring it shot out suckers twenty feet high.

"In the evening, to get away from his family who bayed at the TV shows, he would walk into the garden. One night he noticed on the hedge was a single bloom.

"It was enormous. A huge thing the size of a human head. The leaves were pink and when he smelled it, it took his breath away. He would stand on the overgrown lawn watching the flower from a distance. The slight breeze would make it nod slightly. The way people do when they are listening to something that interests them.

"Night after night, he went out to gaze at it. Then he began to touch the petals. They were so smooth; they had a creamy texture like skin.

"He began to fantasise about a rose lover. Now, if you day-dream, usually it is something that just happens: it flashes into your head. You don't have to work at it. To say this Council clerk had no real imagination is untrue, but his imagination had atrophied, so he laboured secretly on them until headaches felt as if they would twist off his scalp. When the headache abated he would write down his dreams as if he were keeping a petty cash ledger, in a neat orderly way. In these fantasies he did not plunge in to imagine the wildest, the most desirable things. No, they were meticulously planned. First he built a base or foundation that would follow. He made a list then on a separate piece of paper. Following that he would walk about the garden glancing at the list and picturing in his mind what he'd written. Nothing else. Like:

"Today. I looked at the rose. Petals like skin. Very soft. Touch the petals. I feel a pulse. A thorn pricks a petal, puncturing it deeply. Blood. One tiny drop stands up, a red bead on the petal. Carefully, I remove all the

thorns. It will not happen again.

"And so on. When he had gone through the little scene again and again, sometimes for two or three days, he acted it out. There was no blood of course, he imagined the pulse. But when he stripped the thorns from the nearest bushes part of the fantasy came true.

"Then he imagined himself kissing the rose. He wrote:

"I kiss the rose. It feels warm. When I look back, the rose looks like a face, watching me from the bush. The big head nods at me. We understand each other.

"He dreams the dream a dozen times. Then one night he knows the time has come to enact it. At midnight he gets out of bed and goes down to the garden and ..."

"And?" By now David was returning the caress and lightly rubbed her wrist.

"And they found him the next morning. Naked. Laid amongst the bushes, covered in scratches and entangled in the branches. The rose bloom had gone. His family called his name but he did not move."

"Dead?"

"No. But wherever the rose bloom had gone it had taken something with it. The man's restlessness."

"He must have felt better for it."

She shrugged. "Maybe. The spark had gone out of him - what made him different. Now he sits quietly watching the TV quiz shows with framed photographs of his grandchildren on the mantelpiece. A contented nobody."

"Is that such a bad thing?" He looked at her.

She returned the look. For the last ten or fifteen minutes he'd been planning what he'd do. Plotting his move. But it didn't happen like that. Whether she started it or he who knows. All he knew was their mouths met.

He was no longer completely in control. Something else powered him now. He kissed her lips and face and kneaded her body. At first his eyes were shut. When he opened them, he saw his fingers knotting and twisting her black hair. He tightened his grip pulling her face to his - hard. Glimpses of skin: so close he could see individual pores, faint freckles. Her rapid breathing was a roar in his ear.

He tasted her lips, her mouth, her spit; her hunger. For him. It sent his heart hammering against his ribs. He'd thought he'd be clumsy, that he would fumble like the beginner he most definitely was. But instinct showed him the way.

Their lips parted. Strangely, as if nothing had happened, she began to talk once more.

Was it her way of stopping him? Had he

gone too far? Had he hurt her? Puzzled, embarrassed, he sat back on the carpet.

"The other part of the story," she was saying, "concerns the man in his cottage in Scotland. Loneliness ran through him like cold river runs through a wood. Always there, always chilling, yet often unseen; it shaped his character; he could not rid himself of it. With the loneliness were extremes of restlessness and frustration. Like the man with the rose he would try and break up his day with long walks over the mountains, trying to exhaust himself into contentment ... or something that felt like it.

"This man was a weaver. He could weave, rugs, blankets, incredible things - but all that bored him now.

"Now he began to dream. He saw himself weaving something that resembled a human limb. Bending over the loom there, pulling and pushing at the blocks, throwing the shuttle backwards and forwards, he worked with a feverish kind of power that excluded food, sleep and exercise.

"At times he would slide back to reality. He would open his eyes. And there on the loom hung a limb and the beginnings of a torso.

"He worked all through the winter. It wasn't to fill the long nights. I want you to understand he really worked at it - a kind of turbulent fury of activity that gobbled his days - until the windows rattled as he cranked the loom. Hour after hour.

"The muscles between his ribs wasted. It left him permanently hunched, and he walked on stiff, thin legs. When at last he needed supplies his legs would carry him down to the village in stiff jerks that would turn heads to watch this human pair of scissors click by. The sheer effort of the work damaged him physically. Mentally he alternated between ecstasy - as he saw the figure take shape - and desperation - when things went wrong, which they frequently did, and he would spend hours unpicking the fabric so he could begin again.

"Then one day it was finished. He'd knotted the last stitch. When he went to bed that night, for the first time he was no longer alone in the cottage.

"A dark figure lay stretched out on the kitchen floor; feet to the fire, head to the door.

"The man slept. That night he did not dream.

"In the morning he came downstairs to find the loom smashed to splinters, his shears blunted and the figure ..."

"It had gone?"

She smiled. "Vanished. Completely."

"I think I'm getting the hang of this now," he said squeezing her arm. "Let me finish: With the departure of the *thing*, as I'll call it, he was a changed man. Content to sit in the local pub, smoke his pipe and listen to the tales of daring-do and blood and guts from the Front."

She nearly jumped up. "David, you know it!" Her reaction surprised him. "No ... I ... no, I'm just pulling your leg."

She looked at him, her face straight. Now he couldn't tell if she was pulling *his* leg or not.

She began to run her fingers through his hair.

Before he'd time to think, 'What do I do now?' instinct had taken control once more and his arms tightened around her small body. Feeling her ribs, the notches of her spine through her T shirt. Then the T shirt was up, riding up over her breasts, and he glimpsed her nipples. They looked like tight little buds. Lips nipping lips, chin, neck, he worked his way down her smooth chest until he'd found her warm breasts. The scent ...

"Yes, yes." She whispered - she demanded. "Yes, yes, yes! Now ... I ... Oh!"

Stripped. Naked. Skin burning red as blood flushed through capillaries. They rolled knotting limbs, lips, tongues; thrusting and scraping their bodies together to create the most delicious friction imaginable.

Somehow they found his bedroom, his bed. He saw her writhing on the bed beneath him, sweat varnished breasts flashing in the moonlight that streamed through the open window.

"Don't stop! Don't stop! Ah ... please. Don't stop." Red lips shaped the ragged blasts of air in his ear into words. Her red lips. This girl. He still couldn't believe it was happening.

"Now, now, NOWWWW!"

For the first time in five years he forgot to examine his feelings, he did not study the experience clinically, for the first time for as long as he could remember the cool observer of life called David Johnson was gone, abandoned somewhere as his body and soul - the whole damn thing - were carried away in the hot rush of overwhelming, overriding, overpowering emotion.

"Do it, do it. DO IT!"

She awoke throbbing from head to foot.

In the moonlight, she saw the sheets stripped from the bed, balled and stained on the floor. She moved an arm and sharp pains prickled from fingertip to elbow. Indeed, her entire body prickled, which provoked a snatched intake of breath every time she

moved.

She turned her head. He had gone.

When she attempted to climb out of bed she found she was stuck to the mattress.

BLOOD.

Just then, the word was too dry to carry meaning. There was only fact. Her blood glued her to the bed. Painfully, she peeled herself from it. Sharp pins needed her with every movement. Lightly she ran her fingers across her bare breasts and stomach to feel tiny scab after scab. Scratches had raised her skin, almost as if it had been tooled by some sharp instrument.

She looked back where he had lain. Pink rose petals were scattered on the mattress.

Unsteadily, she walked to the window and looked out.

The balcony. Against a full moon stood a bush. On that bush a single bloom, the size of a human head; it began to nod slightly as the breeze passed up from the delivery area below.

She rubbed her face.

When she looked again she saw it was him. Turning, she limped back to the bathroom where she picked three dozen thorns from her arms, shoulders, neck, breasts, public hair.

Beneath the fluorescent light she saw that where her arms joined her shoulders, where her legs met her hips, and beneath her small breasts, were minute stitch marks. She looked in the mirror and pushed out her tongue; lodged there were two more thorns in the herringbone pattern of tastebuds. Carefully, she examined the fabric of her body. All the scratches were superficial - no harm done.

She went to the door and called his name.

He came to her. A new expression transformed his face. Wonder. Revelation.

They embraced. Like a gloved hand holding a rose.

"What now?" he murmured in her ear. "What now?"

Sierra de Gredos: where the Spanish mountains chew the blue sky, a wild rose clings to a fractured rock-scape. The rose, brittle, parched, leafless and coated in dust carries a single white bloom. From a branch, prickly with thorns flutters a single silk stocking. Blown by the gritty sirocco, it streams out, the only thing of humankind to move in this sun and wind blasted wilderness.

Bradford. In the Spring. A textile factory. Once it had been disused, the machines idle. Now the looms thundered day and night. Without rest. On, on, on, on.

And in the fertile valleys below, south through Yorkshire, as far as Wakefield, Castleford, Selby, tractors ploughed the soil deep, turning it over and over and over into countless furrows, until the fields looked like black corduroy.

There. They planted the seeds.

"Is this the right road?" he asked as he swung the car onto the dual carriageway and into the fast lane. It was evening.

She peered through the windscreen.

"It looks familiar. It's a long time ago now, but I'm sure I recognise those hills."

He glanced at her as she sat folded into the seat. She was exhausted - they both were. It had been a hell of a long journey. Was it all worth it? He remembered the two stories she had told him. Well, not really stories, he realised now. They were glimpses. Fragments of a possible reality.

She reached forward to switch on the radio (U2: Where the Streets Have No Names).

Suddenly she leaned back, hugging her knees to her body, looking excited. Like they were runaway lovers bound for Christ knows where.

"If only they could see us now."

"Who?" He laughed, amused by her happy expression.

"Your brothers, your sisters."

"I don't have any."

"Mother, father?"

"No. None."

"Friends. Surely there's a pretty girl in the typing pool who flutters her eyelashes at you?"

"There's no-one."

She looked up, her dark eyes catching the lights.

"But if everyone could see us. Everyone you know. And everyone you didn't. Strangers. If they all could really see us now, as if they were reading all this in a book ..."

Sometimes she said the strangest things.

"Well ... What do you think they'd say?"

"Maybe one day we'll ask them."

"Each and every one?"

She nodded. "Each and every single one."

Then she wound down the window and called out:

"Hey world! Hey! Cathy, Chris, John, Steve, Imran, Susan, Andrew, Tracey, Mohammed, Mike, Joan ..." She broke off giggling breathlessly, her eyes, teeth flashing. "But not like that. Not like that at all."

THE END

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20

hasten the evolutionary process, to the benefit of our own present and future.

"We have incidentally extended our 'board' into a vaster three-dimensional array, as you will now see ..."

The King swung his robe as if an arm had moved, and the walls became almost transparent, to reveal an apparently endless array of adjoining cubes extending in all directions, left, right, up and down, six in all. The Terrans had to shield their eyes from the glare of thousands of cubes.

"How far do they extend?" asked Verulam.

"About the same as the radius of your Earth. But in a sense they are endless, owing to gravitational curvature, which means that if you go along any direction far enough, you come back to your starting-point. This of course greatly adds to the complexity of the game. Inferior players are reduced in rank to that of pawns, or eliminated in the analysers, which you notice here and there as cubes coloured black, which are out of bounds in ordinary games. But follow me, we have some refreshments for you."

In an adjoining cube, the Terrans were faced with insipid liquids and synthetic pancakes which they swallowed with wry faces, while the chessmen stood around, gravely observing them.

"Don't you eat?" asked Lingpee.

"Not in your sense," King Yellow replied. "We absorb energy from radiation, like plants." He took off his robe, revealing another exactly similar one beneath.

"Why two robes?" asked Sinpung. "Are you cold?"

"Not at all." The King rapidly removed the second robe, then a third, fourth, fifth - and still one more appeared below. Then he pulled off his face, which was evidently a mask, and below it appeared another similar mask, which he pulled off, and a third ...

"I can do this indefinitely," he remarked, "and you will notice that no matter how many items I remove, I do not appear any thinner. This is just to show you that all here is surface appearance only, and indicates how far we have advanced beyond your stage."

"In that case, if you are so superior to us, why have you bothered to bring us here?"

"As I said, to analyse you, physically and psychologically, in order to formulate the next stage of your development - to our ultimate benefit, as a change in your present

will reflect itself in our present."

"But could this not have paradoxical effects?"

"Only in accord with your primitive scientific views - but not according to our advanced theories of Superficial Reality."

Verulam rose to his feet. "I have a suggestion to make, subject to your approval, that we find out whether we are in fact as inferior as you imagine."

"And how can you do that?"

"By playing a game of chess against your men and seeing who wins!"

A stunned silence fell upon the group. Then a subdued altercation could be heard between Verulam and Sinpung, with Verulam whispering: "What have we got to lose?"

King Yellow seemed to be pondering. "This is absurd," he said at last. "It would be a charade - you could not possibly win. But I am faced with a problem. In our world, no challenge to a match can be denied. We are obliged to play. And if you lose, we would have to annihilate you in a black cube ..."

"And if we win," said Verulam, "we could return safely to Earth? And you will stop interfering with Terrestrial affairs?"

"That would certainly be your just prize."

It was decided that one Earth day would be spent in teaching the rules to the Terrans and setting up the game, and a second day in which the Terrans would confer as to strategy. The three of them would play as a team against a chosen three of the chessmen - two kings and one queen. The Terrans' base cube would be at a distance of twenty cubes from that of the aliens, and each base would adjoin a black cube so neither of the bases could be observed from the other. At the centre of each base cube stood a computer console from which the piece movements could be controlled. The Terrans had red pieces, the aliens yellow. Confusingly, it appeared that by certain rules, the operative pieces could use their own initiative to a limited extent, and King Yellow could only retain his playing role by delegating another piece as the operative king. The three playing pieces kept to their own base cube to which could be admitted at the start of the game their own team of mobile pieces, to whom they gave general instructions as to strategy.

Lingpee noticed that Verulam was spending nearly all the available time conversing with the pawns. She took little part as the situation to her seemed hopeless. Sinpung sat by the console with a look of shocked horror on his face as he realised that the fate of Earth lay in their hands. Only Verulam seemed full of energy, as he rushed first to

the pawns then to Sinpung, talking vaguely about 'iterative sequences' and 'intersecting tesseracts'.

The last thing that Lingpee remembered before the game began was Verulam surrounded by a ring of excited pawns and shouting: "It's got to look as if we're losing! I'll show him Superficial Reality indeed." Then the base cube was locked and Verulam dashed to the console.

Verulam's energy appeared chaotic to his puzzled companions. He began with a sequence of apparently purposeful moves followed by a random set, then another pattern with a new goal followed by a second random set, and so on. He carried on like this even at the expense of several of his men, though occasionally one of his random sets captured an enemy piece, not so many as to preserve a balance.

"You are playing to lose!" exclaimed Sinpung, but Verulam paid no attention. Then they noticed that Verulam's red pawns were closing in on the yellow king to a certain extent, but leaving a gap through which the king could escape. The yellow king edged towards this gap, which contained a few of the black cubes, but found his way blocked by an advancing line of his own yellow

pawns. This enabled the red pawns to close in on the yellow king who took shelter in a restricted area between two black cubes.

"Mate in 10 to the power 8 moves!" exclaimed Verulam triumphantly.

One side of the Terran base opened to reveal King Yellow. "Ridiculous," he said, "to be beaten by my own pawns!" Then he stepped into the adjoining black cube, which glared, denoting annihilation. He could no longer exist when faced with the proof that his own ancestors were superior, proving that Evolution does not necessarily progress towards perfection.

Lingpee and Sinpung were astounded to see all the pawns, both yellow and red, crowding into their base.

"What is going on?" demanded Lingpee. "And how did you win?"

"I explained to the pawns on both sides," replied Verulam calmly, "that if we won, we would take them to Earth where they could form a free pawndom. You have just witnessed the revolt of the pawns - by combining all their own autonomous powers they overcame the computer commands!"

THE END

WRITERS

Budding can be a drag, so let's review one another's stories on a regular basis for mutual encouragement and feedback. Send me a story and I'll forward it to another writer and send you a third writer's story in return. You write your comments onto the text in pencil, and supply a one-page summary of what you thought. And you turn it round in a week. OK?

I'll act as the sorting office and generally monitor the situation - it'll be fun. Maybe we'll all meet up for a beer sometime. Tell your friends, and send your stories to:

John Duffield, 24 Fordwich Rise, Hertford, SG14 2BE

MAGAZINES

Prose

AUGURIES, Nik Morton, 48 Anglesey Road, Alverstoke, Gosport, Hants PO12 2EQ. #7: A5, 40pp, 70pp. The South Hants sf magazine, this time with stories by Tim Nickels, Mike Cobley, John Light, Des Lewis and others.

FISHEYE, Simon Ings, 10 Marlowe Court, Lymer Ave., Gypsy Hill, London SE19 1LP. #7: A5, 104pp, £2:50 or £7:00 for 4 issue subs. Now the Journal of the Cassandra Science Fiction Workshop (see p.2 for details), but still dedicated to the best in new short fiction. This issue's complement uphold the tradition, with particularly fine contributions from Ivahn Capers, Bernard Smith and David Kennedy.

GLOBAL TAPESTRY JOURNAL, Dave Cunliffe, Spring Bank, Salesbury, Blackburn, Lancs BB1 9EU. #18: A5, 80pp, £1:50, 4/£5. Short stories, poems and reviews. A meaty read!

NEW PATHWAYS into science fiction & fantasy, c/o MGA Services, PO Box 863994, Plano, TX 75086-3994 USA. #9: A4, 40pp, \$2:50. A highly polished Stateside magazine boasting Matt Howarth and Brian Aldiss to name but a few.

SPACE & TIME, Gordon Linzner, 138 W. 70th Street (48), New York 10023-4432 USA. #73: A5, 120pp, \$4. A consistently enjoyable crop of highly original sf and fantasy short stories. Always worth investigating.

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KRAX, Andy Robson, 63 Dixon Lane, Leeds LS12 4RR. #23: A5, 52pp, £1/\$1:50. A bastion of the poetry small press.

PAUSE, Johnathon Clifford, National Poetry Foundation, 27 Mill Road, Fareham, Hants PO16 0TH. #27: A5, 28pp, no price given.

POETRY NOTTINGHAM, Howard Atkinson, 21 Duncombe Close, Nottingham NG3 3PH. Vol.41 #3: A5, 48pp, £1:25.

STAPLE, David Duncombe & Tony Rees, School of Humanities, Derbyshire CHE, Matlock, Derbyshire DE4 3FW. #9: A5, 48pp, £1:50.

Visual

MAD DOG, ODDMAGS, 78 Oxford Avenue, Southampton, Hampshire SO2 0DN. #11: A4, 32pp, £1:10. A special Eros/Thanatos issue with comic strips by Bob Moulder, Matt Howarth, SMS and Chris Brasted.

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SCAVENGER'S NEWSLETTER, Janet Fox, 519 Ellinwood, Osage City, KS 66523-1329. #47: A5, 16pp, 12/\$16. An important and influential market magazine sporting reviews and information from both sides of the Atlantic. A firm favourite.

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